

**Learning Outcome Assessment Report of MA Class 2019 and MA Class 2022**  
**September 26, 2021**

**Introduction**

The program review process at DRBU includes a review against the criterion of effectiveness of instruction. Direct learning outcome assessment is the most important process that DRBU has for analyzing and understanding student performance close to graduation. Other methods are indirect, such as analysis of retention and graduation rates, annual student surveys, and student conference reports.

To assess program learning outcomes (“PLOs”) of the MA program (listed in table 1 below) directly, the IR Office selected the focus strand essay assigned in the fourth semester of the two-year program. A focus strand essay is intended to be a serious and thoughtful examination of a particular question and its significance to the study of classic Buddhist texts.

Table 1. List of ILOs and MA PLOs

<b>DRBU Institutional Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>MA in Buddhist Classics Program Learning Outcomes</b>
1. A liberally educated person will develop and practice skills for lifelong learning, which encompass sound judgment; the flexibility to constantly assess evolving internal and external conditions; and, accordingly, the ability to reconsider, adjust, alter, or even abandon his or her course or stance.	1. Exercise ethical sensibility.
2. A liberally educated person will appreciate the methods of inquiry and insights suggested by the primary texts, particularly in the study of human nature, the workings of causality, and the complex interconnections between the personal, the social, and the natural world.	2. Assess and articulate major Buddhist methods and practices. 3. Explain insights gained from close reading of texts and their implications for the personal, the social, and the natural worlds.
3. A liberally educated person will communicate in a clear, nuanced, candid, and skillful manner.	4. Create sustained, coherent expositions and reflections for both general and specialized audiences.

**Methods**

The two cohorts were selected on purpose to see if instructional mode (in-person versus online) has a significant impact on learning outcomes. MA ‘19 received at least three semesters of education in person before instruction was moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In

contrast, MA '22 had their first two semesters online and the last two semesters in person. For the MA Class of 2019, the strand essay from BUCL613 Lotus Sutra was chosen. For the MA Class of 2022, BUCL614 Avatamsaka was chosen. From each cohort, a sample of three students who displayed varying abilities when first starting the program was carefully chosen. In total, six papers were collected and *anonymized*. Each paper then was assigned to two readers. Twelve teaching faculty volunteered in this assessment process: Susan Rounds, Stacy Chen, Jin Jr Shr, Lauren Bausch, Yi-Huan Shih, Jin Xiang Shih, Meghan Sweet, Sean Kerr, Sarah Babcock, Shari Epstein, Franklyn Wu, and James Roberts.

Each reader was asked to read and assess the paper on all four PLOs ahead of time. After a week, a calibration meeting was held with all the readers, in which they were first paired up with the reader who read the same paper, and then were invited back to report to the big group. Zoom's Breakout Room technology made the processes efficient and the readers had rich discussions. Every reader had enough time to share their feedback on the paper, the rubrics, and areas for improvement in terms of instruction. The IR Office collected all the scores, feedback, and comments by note-taking, which were then further processed and analyzed.

### Data Findings

Based on figure 1, it seems two out of the three papers sampled from MA '19 reached a score of three ("Meets Expectation") on almost all the PLOs. Based on figure 2, one out of the three papers sampled from MA '22 reached a score of three ("Meets Expectation") on all of the PLOs.

Figure 1.

### Papers sampled from MA '19 (fourth semester)

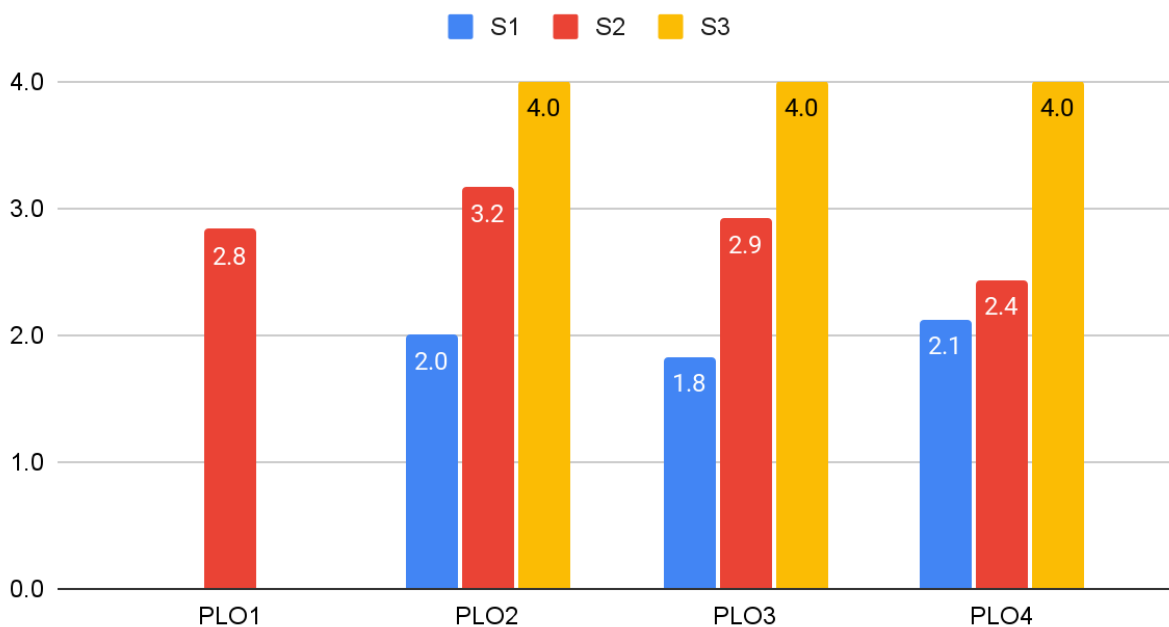


Figure 2.

### Papers sampled from MA '22 (fourth semester)

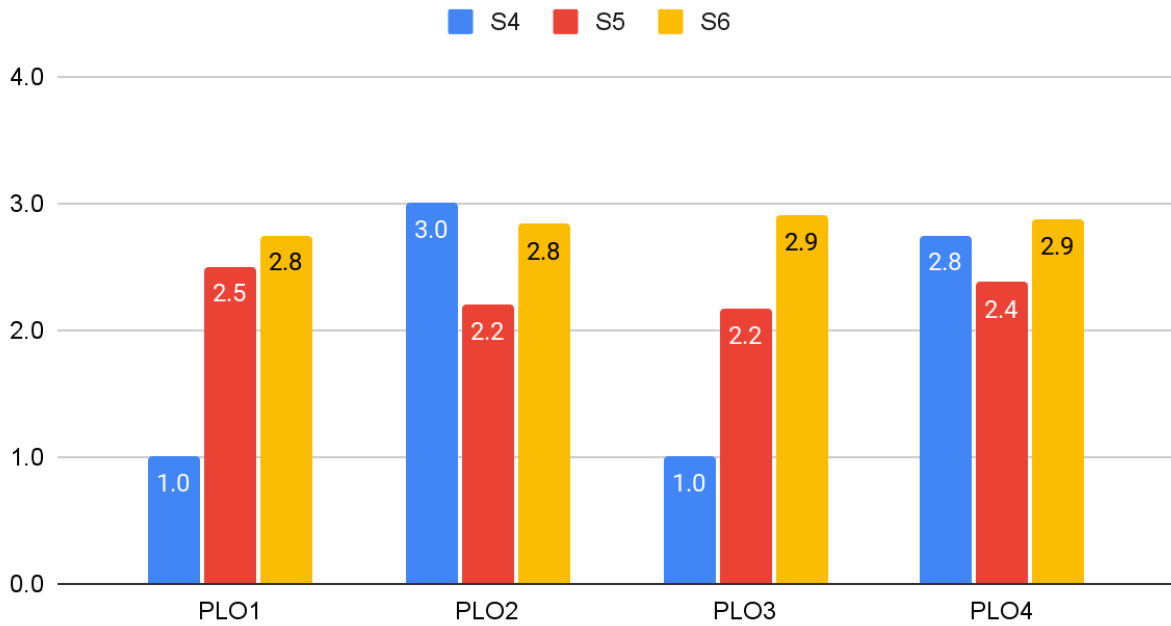
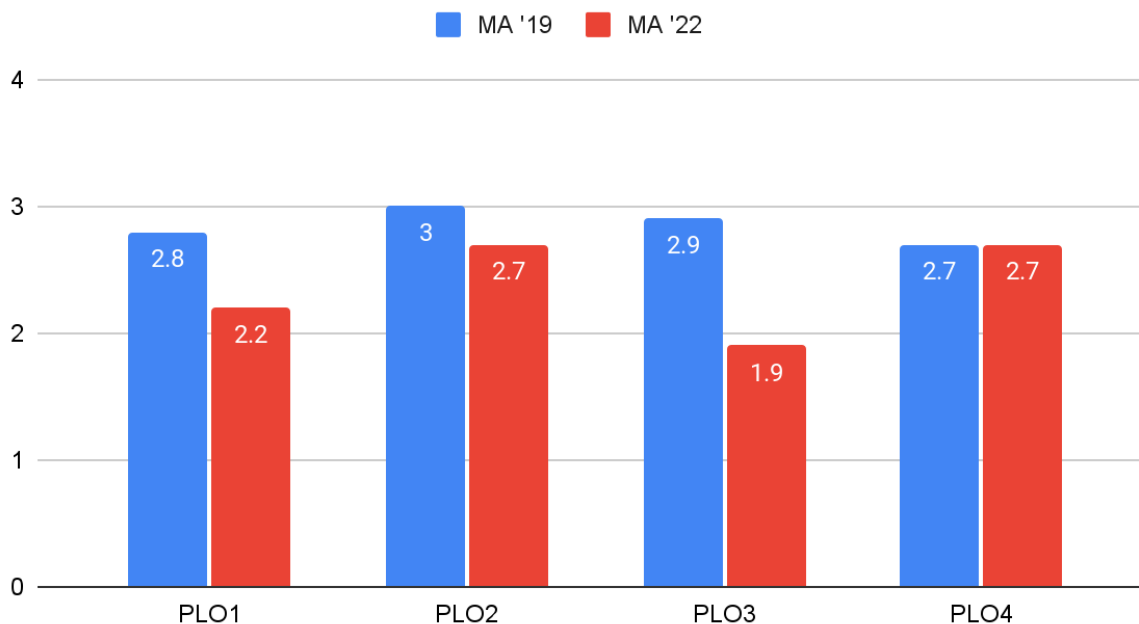


Figure 3. PLO mean scores side-by-side comparison

## MA '19 vs. MA '22



### Qualitative feedback on the papers

BUCL613 Lotus Sutra papers (MA '19):

The readers thought the first paper didn't meet the expectation for graduation: 1) the scope of the paper was extremely vague and broad 2) the student didn't know how to present and analyze quotes effectively 3) the paper didn't follow up with the questions raised at the beginning 4) the mechanics made it difficult for the reader to follow where the author is at in their process of exploration. The readers commended on the creative use of language and enthusiasm shown at the end. The second paper was a relatively successful paper and it brought up interesting topics and the readers got new insights out of it. However, the paper was not so well organized and could have gone into more depths. The third paper was praised highly on all the dimensions: the paper did skillful close reading of the text, brought up nuanced hermeneutics, and it was creatively organized and very effective. The readers found it to be inspiring to read and suggested all the instructors who teach this course to read it.

BUCL614 Avatamsaka Sutra papers (MA '22)

The readers thought the first paper didn't meet the expectation for graduation because it was not engaging the text so much but using the text to do personal reflection on universal questions. The second paper met the expectation for graduation although the readers were unable to assess it on PLO 1 because it wasn't explicitly about anything ethical. The paper was creative and interesting. The readers thought the third paper met the expectations of graduation. Like some other readers, they were unable to assess PLO 1.

### Feedback on the instrument

Some feedback has been summarized, while other feedback is presented exactly as it was reported. Minor changes will be made directly to the rubrics. Overall, the readers considered this updated version an improvement from the previous version. Suggestions from readers are included below:

#### PLO 1: Exercise ethical sensibility

The readers spent quite some time identifying places in the paper that would constitute ethical awareness. Sometimes it was not obvious so they couldn't assign a score for this PLO. The readers suggested that we consider: a. creating specific assignments to assess this PLO, b. using the Buddhist Hermeneutics II paper and emphasizing it in the writing prompt, c. assessing it in class observations, d. creating a self-assessment questionnaire or prompt, e. looking for evidence in student conference reports. In addition, two faculty members raised the issue of whether we should make a distinction between being skillful at engaging with ethical issues versus being ethical in action. It's also important to make it clear in the rubric that a student's specific ethical position is not being evaluated.

#### PLO 2: Assess and articulate major Buddhist methods and practices

Readers asked for more clarity about the scope of "Buddhist methods and practices" and suggested adding a footnote to the rubric. One reader proposed that the scope can include tools of inquiry that show up in the primary texts, CEs, and CEIs. Another reader proposed one way a student can demonstrate this PLO in a paper is to use the mode of inquiry presented in the text engaged with to write the paper. Other questions raised included: how to evaluate whether students are actually applying or understanding tools and methods? How to ensure students are expressing programmatic learning? I.e., using experiences from CEIs and texts as evidence to support their arguments.

#### PLO 3: Explain insights gained from close reading of texts and their contemporary implications for the personal, social, and/or natural world

Readers thought the descriptor of Level 3 under "Hermeneutics" should be changed to "Proposes more than one interpretation of the text." In addition, consider changing the wording of PLO 3 from "Explain insights gained from close reading of texts..." to "Explain insights presented in the texts..." The key is to emphasize the importance of deeply engaging with the texts by analyzing the texts rather than just writing about one's opinions without providing textual evidence.

#### PLO 4: Create sustained, coherent expositions and reflections for different audiences

Readers suggested incorporating the student's engagement with the source materials somewhere in this rubric, especially in "Application and Analysis." For example, how the thesis and development arise from the text(s). They want to see students demonstrate more engagement with the texts.

### **Proposed Action Items**

1. Organize discussions among teaching faculty around PLO 1, PLO 2, and PLO 3 to discuss issues raised during the assessment workshop (see “feedback on the instrument” above).
2. Continuously refine the rubrics and assessment methods based on feedback from the faculty.
3. Providing writing guidance as part of a course taught in the first semester to establish clear expectations for students in terms of writing. The BA program has Rhetoric & Writing I to fulfill this need. One suggestion was the Platform Sutra.
4. When creating a writing prompt, make sure to ask students to support their arguments with evidence from the text(s) or their experiences in the program, for e.g., from CEs or CEIs.